

# FACT SHEET ON YOUTH: SEXUAL ABUSE AND VIOLENCE

OCTOBER 2003



## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Sexual abuse is the most common form of child abuse.**
- **Girls are more likely to be abused than boys.**
- **Many abused children, are abused more than once.**
- **Twenty-five percent of male perpetrators are teenagers**
- **UNICEF cited Jamaica as the most violent country to live in during 2001.**
- **Exposure to violence and sexual abuse can cause serious trauma and behavioural problems in young people.**
- **Most acts of sexual abuse, and a significant number of violent incidents, occur within the home.**

## Background

The issue of violence is a critical one for Jamaica. Currently, many would agree that it is the most serious social problem that citizens face. Violence has cultural, economic, political, and psychological ramifications for all Jamaicans. Research has shown that exposure to high levels of violence can, potentially, have a significantly negative impact on the development of adolescents<sup>1</sup>. Researchers have also shown that there is a positive correlation between economic and social inequality, and the prevalence of violence.<sup>1</sup> In Jamaica, a country of 2.6 million people, the wealthiest 10% of the population consumes 10 times as much as its poorest 10% (UNICEF, 2000). Currently, it is estimated that more than 40% of the population of Jamaica lives below the poverty line.<sup>1</sup>

Sexual abuse is prevalent in Jamaica today. Even though it is more common among girls and women, boys are sometimes victims. Studies show that boys at higher risk of sexual abuse tend to be less than 13 years old, of low socio-economic status, and not living with their fathers.<sup>2</sup> Williams' (1999) reports that sexual abuse in boys appears as a phenomenon of pre-pubescence. In contrast, sexual abuse among girls appears in adolescence.

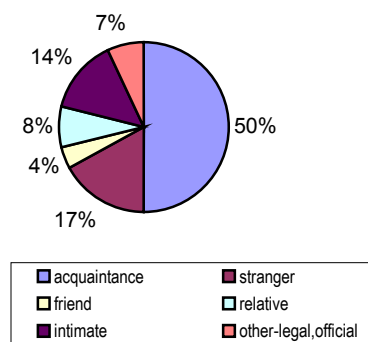
## Sexual Abuse – A Serious Problem for Jamaican Children

It is estimated that over 70% of all victims treated for sexual assault are younger than 19 years. When analysed further, 7% of victims treated for sexual assault are under the age of 5 years, 11% are between the ages of 5 and 9, and 53% are between 10 and 19 years - adolescents. Sixteen percent of sexually abused children are boys<sup>9</sup>. Sexual abuse of boys occurs at a younger age than girls; 45% of sexually abused boys and 29% of sexually abused girls are between the ages of 5 and 9.<sup>9</sup>

A recent study of 450 school-aged children 13-15 years in Kingston, reported that 13% of the sample had the traumatic experience of attempted rape<sup>2</sup>. According to statistics from the Constabulary Communication Network (CCN), between 1999 and 2000, North St. Catherine had a 70% increase in reported cases of carnal abuse and rape.<sup>2</sup>

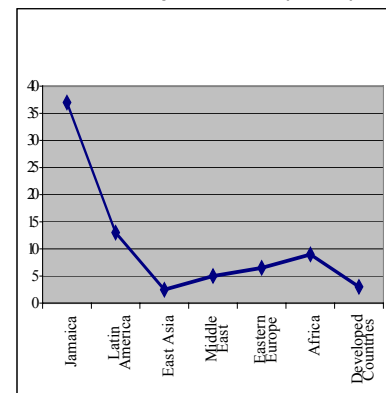
Children are most likely to be abused by persons known to them. The most common type of abuse occurring before the age of 16 is rape or attempted rape. These together account for 77% of all abuse cases<sup>9</sup>. Recent reports show that around 12% of girls younger than 15 years reported being raped or forced during their first sexual experience, and 26% of young women, ages 15-19 years, have had a similar experience<sup>9</sup>. The very high level of sexual assault of girls is thought to be an important contributing factor to the increasing incidence of HIV infection among female adolescents.<sup>9</sup>

Victim-Perpetrator Relationship  
KPH Violence Related Injuries -  
2001



Source: Planning Institute of  
Jamaica 2000

Homicide per 100,000 (1990s)



Source: Ministry of Health 2002.

### Especially Vulnerable Children

Williams (1999) study highlights that a number of children work as prostitutes, especially in tourist areas and in go-go dance clubs in other towns. Others are engaged in transactional sex with an adult benefactor with whom sex is exchanged for goods and money.<sup>10</sup> Children who are mentally handicapped are frequently victims of physical and emotional abuse and neglect. Mentally handicapped boys are especially at high risk for sexual abuse.<sup>10</sup>

### Jamaica – A Violent Place

In 2001, UNICEF cited Jamaica as the most violent country to live in. Crime trends are high in Jamaica and the murder rates are more than three times the average for Latin America, as a whole, and more than 15 times greater than the average for Latin American countries (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2000).<sup>3</sup>

A total of 1139 persons died violently in 2001, a rate of 44 per 100,000 persons. Homicides were the leading cause of death in adolescents and a leading cause of death in all other age groups.<sup>4</sup> Approximately 57% of all violence-related injuries treated in public hospitals in 2001 took place in the streets or in a public area, while 34% of these incidents took place within the home.<sup>5</sup> In 1999, 74 children under five years, 114 between the ages of 5 and 9, and 556 adolescents - 10-19 years, were seen in the Accidents and Emergency Units of Public Hospitals in Jamaica.<sup>4</sup> A 1996 study of nationally representative sample of students show 16% of boys and 11% of girls report carrying a knife or razor to school, while 5% of boys and 2% of girls report ever carrying a gun to school.<sup>6</sup>

In 1999, 55% of all crimes in Jamaica were committed by youth 26 years and under.<sup>7</sup> Forty percent (40%) of all murder victims in that year were between the ages of 13

and 25 years<sup>7</sup> and 25% of all sexual offenders were under the age of 20.<sup>8</sup>

### Most Acts of Violence occur within the home

Parents and caregivers are responsible for the majority of physical and emotional abuse occurring among adolescents.<sup>1</sup> Non-relatives are responsible for the majority of sexual abuse. Almost 50% of all children participating in a 1997 survey, conducted in 11 urban secondary schools, reported that they sometimes witnessed violent acts in their neighbourhoods.<sup>1</sup> Sixty percent had at least one family member who was a victim of violence and over one third, a family member who died as a result of violence.<sup>1</sup>

### Effects of Abuse and Exposure to Abuse

In the dysfunctional family, poverty and socioeconomic disadvantages, ethnicity and culture, conflict and stress (internal and external), and individual psychopathologies are the most common risk factors for perpetration of abuse and outcomes of child abuse.<sup>9</sup> One study found that television violence influenced incarcerated juveniles and students (7-17 years) in schools in Kingston who, from early childhood, had a deep affinity for television and the violence genre. Recent study of a sample of 1720 girls and boys (11-12 years) in primary and secondary schools in Kingston, St. Andrew, and Portmore in St. Catherine showed that children who regularly watch "action" shows were prone to behavioural problems such as being withdrawn, attention problems, thought disorders, delinquency, and aggression.<sup>11</sup>

### What Is Being Done for Youth at Risk?

There is clear evidence that there is need for increased public education, in general and for adolescents in particular, to promote non-violent techniques of conflict resolution and

on "restorative" justice. Several national and local level initiatives have been implemented to respond to the problem. For example, Peace and Love in Schools (PALS) implemented by the Ministry of Education and the private sector. Outreach is being done to promote the concept of restorative justice at parish level. In the parish of Hanover, for example, the Hanover Disputes Resolution Committee is the focal group. Other agencies like the Victim Support Unit, an arm of the Ministry of National Security, the Peace Management Initiative, and Woman Inc., are working with schools and local communities to reduce violence and abuse in Jamaica.

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